

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
Newport, R.I.

**CASUALTY AVERSION:**  
**THE NEW PRINCIPLE OF WAR?**

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the Requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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16 May 2000

**DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A**  
Approved for Public Release  
Distribution Unlimited

DTIC QUALITY INSPECTED 4  
**20000912 124**

## REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

1. Report Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED			
2. Security Classification Authority:			
3. Declassification/Downgrading Schedule:			
4. Distribution/Availability of Report: DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A: APPROVED FOR PUBLIC RELEASE; DISTRIBUTION IS UNLIMITED.			
5. Name of Performing Organization: JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT			
6. Office Symbol: C		7. Address: NAVAL WAR COLLEGE 686 CUSHING ROAD NEWPORT, RI 02841-1207	
8. Title (Include Security Classification): CASUALTY AVERSION: THE NEW PRINCIPLE OF WAR? (U)			
9. Personal Authors: CDR IAN R. S. TOWNSEND, USN			
10. Type of Report: FINAL		11. Date of Report: 16 MAY 2000	
12. Page Count: 26   12A Paper Advisor (if any):			
13. Supplementary Notation: A paper submitted to the Faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the JMO Department. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.			
14. Ten key words that relate to your paper: CASUALTY AVERSION    CASUALTY AVERSE    KOSOVO    PUBLIC OPINION    PUBLIC SUPPORT PRINCIPLES OF WAR    PRINCIPLES OF MOOTW    MOOTW    SOMALIA    BOSNIA			
15. Abstract: Casualty aversion has progressively come to play a major role in influencing the conduct and outcome of recent US military interventions starting with the rapid US withdrawal from Somalia, the decision to not intervene in the Rwanda genocide, and the military's reluctance in conducting the peacekeeping mission in Bosnia. Kosovo became the epitome of a "casualty averse" war. The consequences generated by the casualty averse policies and rules of engagement in Kosovo were significant and will have far reaching implications. The civilian and military leaders' aversion to casualties, if allowed to continue and proliferate, will seriously impact the viability of the US's foreign policy and have major implications on the planning and conduct of future joint military operations. While there may be some positive outcomes that casualty aversion may create, most of the implications will be detrimental to the achievement of military effectiveness in future interventions.			
16. Distribution / Availability of Abstract:	Unclassified X	Same As Rpt	DTIC Users
17. Abstract Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED			
18. Name of Responsible Individual: CHAIRMAN, JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT			
19. Telephone: 841-6461		20. Office Symbol: C	

### Abstract

Casualty aversion has progressively come to play a major role in influencing the conduct and outcome of recent U.S. military interventions starting with the rapid US withdrawal from Somalia, the decision to not intervene in the Rwanda genocide, and the military's reluctance in conducting the peacekeeping mission in Bosnia. Kosovo became the epitome of a "casualty averse" war. The consequences generated by the casualty averse policies and rules of engagement in Kosovo were significant and will have far reaching implications. The civilian and military leaders' aversion to casualties, if allowed to continue and proliferate, will seriously impact the viability of the US's foreign policy and have major implications on the planning and conduct of future joint military operations. While there may be some positive outcomes that casualty aversion may create, most of the implications will be detrimental to the achievement of military effectiveness in future interventions.

## **Introduction**

“Politicians must never show military advisors that they are fearful of too many casualties. For if you do that you will put caution on the commanders right down the way, when caution probably may not be the right answer.”<sup>1</sup> Lord Whitelaw, British War Cabinet member

Principles of war are abstract assumptions or maxims that have been derived from a study of the mass of complicated war experiences throughout history.<sup>2</sup> Today’s military recognizes and teaches nine fundamental principles of war, as well as six fundamental principles of military operations other than war (MOOTW), that serve as guides for the conduct of future operations. It is important for military officers to know that such principles exist and to decide for themselves how and to what extent to apply them when making operational decision.<sup>3</sup> However, when one looks at the term “principles” there is a second meaning. In its broader sense “principles” may mean simply a well-understood and commonly accepted philosophy concerning the governance of strategy.<sup>4</sup>

During the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century there has been one fundamental “philosophy,” or assumption, well understood by many academics and public opinion experts and commonly accepted by senior civilian and military policymakers alike. This “philosophy” has had both a detrimental influence on and pervasive control over the conduct of US foreign policy and military operations. This assumption is casualty aversion, which is based on the belief that the American public is not willing to accept casualties in US wars and military operations.

**Thesis:** Casualty aversion has progressively come to play a major role in influencing the conduct and outcome of recent US military interventions starting with the rapid US withdrawal from Somalia, the decision to not intervene in the Rwanda genocide, and the military’s reluctance in conducting the peacekeeping mission in Bosnia. Kosovo became the epitome of a “casualty averse” war. The consequences generated by the casualty averse policies and rules of engagement in Kosovo were significant and will have far reaching implications. The civilian and military leaders’ aversion to casualties, if allowed to continue and proliferate, will seriously impact the viability of the US’s foreign

policy and have major implications on the planning and conduct of future joint military operations.

While there may be some positive outcomes that casualty aversion may create, most of the implications will be detrimental to the achievement of military effectiveness in future interventions.

This paper will discuss the myth, misperception and reality of casualty aversion, and the conditions that influence the public's tolerance for casualties. An analysis of how casualty aversion strongly influenced the conduct of the Kosovo war will detail the consequences and implications that casualty aversion may have on future Kosovo-like interventions and joint doctrine.

### **The Myth, Misperception, and Reality of Casualty Aversion**

There is a prevailing notion among senior political and military leaders that the Vietnam War taught us that the American public is no longer willing to tolerate American casualties in US wars and military operations.<sup>5</sup> It is now accepted as conventional wisdom that the modern American public is very averse to accepting US casualties in operations abroad. This "wisdom" is currently most often cited in reference to the participation of US armed forces in humanitarian and peace operations, i.e., MOOTW. On other occasions it is presented as a broadly accepted wisdom applicable to all military operations abroad, regardless of purpose. It is a wisdom held by, and almost always voiced by, influential elites in the nation's foreign policy community, opinions makers such as elected politicians, members of the press, columnists, and the ubiquitous chattering classes of Washington talk shows.<sup>6</sup>

There are two contradictory corollaries that accompany the casualty aversion "wisdom." The first is that a majority of the American public simply will no longer accept casualties under any circumstances and that the first deaths will cause a crescendo in demands for immediate withdrawal. The second has it that casualties in fact inflame the mass public, leading to an inexorable demand for "escalation to victory."<sup>7</sup>

The incident most often cited as the origin of this conventional wisdom is the incident in Mogadishu, Somalia on 3 October 1993 when 18 US Army Rangers were killed in a firefight with forces of Somali warlord Aideed. Following CNN's live coverage of the body of an American soldier

being dragged through the streets, Congress called for the immediate withdrawal of the troops, predicated largely on the widespread assertion that that was what the American public wanted; this equated to the first corollary of casualty aversion. Four days later President Clinton announced the end of US involvement in the operation, ostensibly because of the public's adverse reaction to the casualties.<sup>8</sup> He also announced a rapid timetable for withdrawal of all US forces. The incident ultimately led to the sacking of Clinton's Secretary of Defense, Les Aspin, further heightening the understanding within the policy community that because of the public's sensitivities, casualties could not be tolerated.<sup>9</sup> Thus the myth grew that the public's intolerance of casualties results in quick reversals of public support for military operations abroad.<sup>10</sup>

**Misperception:** The policymakers' belief in casualty aversion is, unfortunately, reinforced by a major misperception they have on how they think the public views America's role in the world. This misperception, discovered in a study conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA),<sup>11</sup> is that policymakers believe that Americans are going through an "isolationist" phase in which they want to disengage from the world – that they are intrinsically opposed to foreign aid, averse to significant US involvement in the UN, reluctant to contribute troops to peacekeeping operations, and are, thus, highly reactive to US troop fatalities in missions abroad.<sup>12</sup> Consistent with that belief, the US: cut spending on international affairs by 25% between 1991 and 1998; slashed foreign aid; closed more than 30 embassies; has fallen several years behind in paying its dues to the UN; and has resisted contributing US troops to peacekeeping operations.<sup>13</sup>

Why do policymakers have such a misperception? A majority of the public feels that the US has been playing the role of the dominant world leader, or "world policeman," more than it should be and this appears to have been misinterpreted by policymakers as a move toward isolationism.<sup>14</sup> Another factor is that the small percentage of the population that telephones or writes their representatives, or attends representatives' town-hall meetings, is more isolationist than the general public. Also, it appears that many policymakers don't systematically seek out information about the

public, trusting, instead, their own gut instincts, which, more often than not, do not capture the true public's feelings.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, polls, which can provide a remarkably reliable indicator of public opinion, play only a marginal role in policymakers' deliberations.

**The Reality:** Several recent scholarly studies conducted by PIPA, the Rand Corporation, and the Triangle Institute for Security Studies (TISS)<sup>16</sup> have all confirmed that the myth of casualty aversion is firmly entrenched at the upper levels of civilian and military decision makers.<sup>17</sup> They have also shown, quite convincingly, that the majority of the American people are far more willing to tolerate combat losses than civilian policymakers or senior military officers provided that several conditions are met. All the studies were unanimous in the importance of these conditions.

1. The operation is perceived as consistent with U.S. national interests. When important interests and principles are at stake, the public will be more willing to tolerate rather high casualties.<sup>18</sup>
2. The operation is perceived as having potential for success. The higher the probability that the intervention will successfully achieve its objectives, the higher the probability that the intervention will be supported.<sup>19</sup> The public has an amazing capacity to distinguish between suffering defeat and suffering casualties.<sup>20</sup>
3. The operation has strong bipartisan consensus. When there is bipartisan consensus among leaders in support of an intervention, divisions within the public are generally muted; where there are partisan divisions among the leaders, the public tends to become divided along the same lines.<sup>21</sup>
4. The mission is clearly perceived as part of a UN peacekeeping operation.

The most important condition is, by far, the strong consensus between the President and Congress. This condition of leadership is paramount especially when things go terribly wrong in a military intervention.

The reality in Somalia was that, immediately following the incident, polls showed that less than 40% of respondents wanted the US to withdraw immediately from Somalia. In fact, the majority said that they wanted to respond by beefing-up forces, by bringing in more forces.<sup>22</sup> This is consistent with

a 1996 Rand study that found that a majority wants to maintain or increase forces in order to bring about the release of hostages or prisoners of war. This finding held true in Korea, Vietnam, and Somalia. ABC's poll showed 75% favored going after Somali warlord Aideed with a "major military attack" if the American prisoners were not released through negotiations.<sup>23</sup> There was a feeling that we needed to get out eventually, but that was already in place before the fatalities. So, in fact, there really wasn't a major change in attitudes about the Somalia operation as a result of the fatalities. But an angry and vocal minority, calling for an immediate withdrawal, made a bigger impact on Congress and the media and gave the impression of being a majority.<sup>24</sup>

The leadership failure of the Clinton administration during this incident was that they made no effort to frame the casualties as anything other than a disaster in a mission that had changed from one of humanitarian assistance to one of nation-building, of which capturing Aideed was an objective of that mission.<sup>25</sup> It was the unwillingness, or inability, of the Clinton administration to create consensus among Congressional and military leaders that left its policy [in Somalia, as well as in Bosnia, and Kosovo] "hostage" to the public's recoiling from the loss of American soldiers' lives.<sup>26</sup> But this was not the doing of the public. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that there is room for political leaders to shape public opinion and create a forum for deliberation and debate of intervention decisions.<sup>27</sup> To be sure, in that debate the public will consider in a rational calculus the risks to American lives as well as other costs and benefits of the intervention, but it is not a debate that is foreclosed because they are "casualty averse."<sup>28</sup>

The misinterpreted lessons in casualty aversion that the policymakers learned from the Somalia experience were quickly put into practice when Rwanda experienced massive ethnic violence only a few months after the Somalia incident.<sup>29</sup> With Somalia fresh on policymakers' minds, no peacekeeping action was taken and more than a half-million Rwandans were massacred in just 100 days as a result of a campaign of genocide. A panel of military experts later concluded that a peacekeeping force of 5000 troops could have prevented the slaughter.<sup>30</sup>



**Casualty Acceptance and Type of War:** The public's acceptance of casualties will be guided by how well the required conditions, already discussed above, are satisfied. As expected, in World War II the public's unprecedented high apparent tolerance for casualties was associated with the widely perceived gravity of the stakes that were involved, the belief that core values were being promoted, continued optimism that the Allies would defeat the Axis powers, and consistently high levels of support for the war from political leaders.<sup>31</sup> During the Gulf War the majorities again viewed important principles and interest to be at stake and showed a commensurably higher willingness to tolerate casualties than most realize.<sup>32</sup>

MOOTW, however, is precisely the sort of operations that have historically suffered from a low willingness to accept costs – prolonged interventions in a complex political situation in failed states are characterized by civil conflict, in which US interests and principles are typically much less compelling, or clear, and in which success is often elusive at best.<sup>33</sup> The unwillingness of the public, as well as the military, to tolerate very high casualties in recent MOOTW is because the majorities – and their leaders – do not perceive the benefits or prospects to justify much loss of life.<sup>34</sup>

It is, therefore, not so much the passage of time as the prevalence of a particular class of operation that explains the apparent recent low tolerance for casualties in US military operations.<sup>35</sup>

**Who is more Casualty Averse?** The Triangle Institute conducted a study using three groups – senior or rising military officers, influential civilians and the general public- and asked them to consider how many American deaths would be acceptable to complete three plausible mission successfully: defend Taiwan against China; prevent Iraq from acquiring WMD; and defending democracy in Congo.<sup>36</sup>

Overall, the general public will accept casualties so long as the mission has the potential to be successful; one of the established conditions for public support. Indeed, in more traditional scenarios such as defending Taiwan against a Chinese invasion, the general public gave estimates of acceptable casualties roughly equivalent to civilian and military elites. In non-traditional scenarios, such as restoring democracy in the Congo or preventing Iraq from obtaining weapons of mass destruction, the

general public gave substantially higher estimates of acceptable casualties than do civilian or military elites.<sup>37</sup>

On MOOTW missions, elite military officers responded with estimates that were one-fourth to one-half that of elite civilians. This aversion to casualties is, in part, a function of what might be called rational calculations. That is, one reason military officers gave lower casualty estimates for MOOTW missions is that they do not believe those missions are vital to the national interest. It stands to reason, therefore, that they would not consider them worth extensive loss of American lives.<sup>38</sup> This aversion is, however, more pronounced among more senior than junior officers. Furthermore, Army officers were more casualty averse than Marine officers or Air Force officers, but roughly comparable to Navy officers.<sup>39</sup>

Significantly, the evidence indicates that casualty aversion is not simply a function of self-preservation. If that were the case, the researchers would expect sensitivity to be highest among officers whose roles are combat-related. However, the data shows virtually no difference in casualty aversion among the combat, combat support and other sub-samples of elite military officers. Even more telling, younger officers, who are more likely to see combat duty, were more tolerant of casualties.<sup>40</sup> The researchers felt there were several factors at work:<sup>41</sup>

1. Officers certainly feel a special responsibility for their troops' welfare.
2. Senior officers may lack confidence in the reliability of civilian leaders, i.e., the government will abandon the military if casualties mount (as happened in the case of Somalia).
3. Casualty aversion may be an aspect of a growing zero-defect mentality among senior officers, in which casualties are viewed as not only deaths—they are immediate indication that an operation is a failure.

Figure 1 highlights the results of the Triangle Institute study and clearly shows the gap between the senior political and military leaders and the Junior Officers and general public. The study concluded that most Junior Officers and the American public believe that, while casualties should obviously be minimized, they remain an inevitable part of any deployment. They also believe that the

accomplishment of MOOTW missions is, under certain circumstances, worth the risk of loss of American lives.<sup>42</sup>

<b>An Analysis of Casualty Aversion in MOOTW</b>		
	<b>Is the US Public Casualty Averse?</b>	<b>Why?</b>
<b>Political Leaders</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Intervention is High Risk</b>
<b>Military Leaders</b>	<b>Echo</b>	<b>High Risk; Less Preferred Form of War</b>
<b>Junior Military Officers</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Willing to Sacrifice</b>
<b>American Public</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Will Accept, Under Certain Conditions</b>

Figure 1<sup>43</sup>

The implications of this gap is that it is creating a tremendous amount of friction and dissatisfaction within the military, especially at the lower officer levels. "Force protection," meaning the prevention of US casualties, has become an explicit mission goal, on par with, if not superceding, the accomplishment of the primary mission. Senior civilian policymakers have been putting incredible pressure on the military for zero casualties in its MOOTW missions. Casualty aversion is corrosive to the professional military ethic and is anathematic to the military's principles of self-sacrifice and mission accomplishment. Lawrence Korb, former Assistant Secretary of Defense, hit this issue right on the mark when he said, "...if you tell American fighting men, whether it's air, land or sea, that we're not willing to suffer any casualties and, therefore, we're not going to fight this war in the most militarily effective way, that that is corrosive to the military ethic and everything that the military stands for."<sup>44</sup>

Several high ranking speakers that have presented lectures of opportunity at the Naval War College during the 1999 academic year reinforced the above sentiment that the highly casualty averse civilian leadership has shifted the emphasis from mission accomplishment to force protection to the detriment of military effectiveness.

## **KOSOVO: An Analysis of the Consequences of Casualty Aversion**

“My fellow Americans, today our armed forces joined our NATO allies in air strikes against Serbian forces responsible for the brutality in Kosovo. We have acted with resolve. *But I do not intend to put our troops in Kosovo to fight a war.*”  
President Clinton, 24 March 1999<sup>45</sup>

With the above declaration, President Clinton established Kosovo as the most casualty averse conflict in US history and shattered every principle of war by removing the most credible deterrent that NATO possessed against Milosevic, the threat of a ground war. Regardless of whether NATO would have used the ground option, NATO failed to preserve this important political and strategic lever that may have contributed to an earlier termination of the conflict. Kosovo became a war whose military strategy and tactics were conceived and executed under the “umbrella” of casualty aversion. All decisions on the type of force to be used, how it would be employed, when it would be employed, and by whom were determined strictly on the basis of if it put NATO personnel or Serbian/Kosovar civilians at risk.

Clinton Administration officials explained that their assumption that the American public would react strongly to US troop fatalities played a major role in the decision to limit US military action in Kosovo.<sup>46</sup> The NATO countries with the exception of Great Britain echoed this same sentiment. In actuality, it was the political constraints imposed on President Clinton by the Republican-led Congress that led the president to select only surgical air strikes. Coming so soon after Clinton’s impeachment and various “wag the dog” controversies of the preceding year, Congress was in no mood to consider more troops in the Balkans especially following Clinton’s failed promise to bring the US troops in Bosnia home within one year.<sup>47</sup> Neither the US nor the NATO governments took the time to establish and solidify the conditions previously discussed that are required to earn the public’s support: tie-in the operation with US national interests; ensure that it has the potential for success; and achieve strong bipartisan consensus. With the deep divide between the executive and the legislative branch, it was little wonder that the public would also be equally divided.

From the outset, US and NATO officials maintained that either of two desirable military approaches – introducing ground forces, or beginning with a massive air campaign that would have struck hard at all of Milosevic's strategic centers of power on the first night of bombing – would have splintered the alliance.<sup>48</sup> While “there was no [NATO] consensus for the application of using ground forces in a non-permissive environment...”<sup>49</sup> there was consensus for the application of airpower but its use was to be limited and incremental. Thus the only means to fight the Kosovo war became the air campaign rife with self-imposed political limitations.

The irony of the Kosovo war was that there, eventually, was a ground offensive – carried out by the well-armed Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) – that helped change the direction of the war. Airpower was ineffective against ground targets through the first 60 days. But once the KLA began its attacks and forced the Serbian military out in the open and engaged then, the success of air strikes rose exponentially.<sup>50</sup> Soon after, Milosevic agreed to a peace settlement.

**Consequences of Casualty Aversion in Kosovo:** NATO's employment of an air-only campaign, the withholding of ground forces, and its unwillingness to risk casualties of any of its forces led to the development of tactics and rules of engagement that resulted in serious and far-reaching consequences. It has been said that Kosovo has reinforced the expectation that future wars will be coalition wars.<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, such coalition wars now means “war by consensus and committee” where the lowest common political denominator will determine the conduct of the war. The implications for the U.S. is that we either learn to adapt to these coalition-imposed limitations in future conflicts or we go it alone. If one accepts the premise that the US will only fight coalition wars in the future then the following consequences may be a harbinger of what may be expected in future coalition wars.

- **Surprise was eliminated and the probability of success was reduced.** NATO's resolve was greater than the resources they were willing to commit to the action; means were unequal to undefined ends.<sup>52</sup> Clausewitz warned not to start a war without being clear in their mind what they intend to

achieve by that war and how they intend to fight it – don't take the first step without considering the last.<sup>53</sup> The US and NATO, having no clear vision of an end state, and eliminating an important aspect of their means [ground forces], took the first step, bombing, without considering the next, or the last.<sup>54</sup> Using airpower alone with no clear end state and broadcasting this message to the enemy eliminated the element of surprise and reduced the probability of success.<sup>55</sup>

- No ground forces signaled Serbia that it had freedom of action in Kosovo. Without a ground threat, the Serbs were able to enlarge their forces, adapt their tactics, and complete the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo.<sup>56</sup>
- Airpower shifted the burden of violence onto the civilian population. NATO's bombing from 15,000 feet protected the pilots but resulted in target misidentification, civilian deaths, and totally failed to meet its initial goal of putting an "immediate end to ethnic cleansing"; a mission that only ground forces could have accomplished.<sup>57</sup> The end result of the Serbian ethnic cleansing that occurred during the course of the air campaign was approximately 10,000 dead Kosovars and over 1.5 million refugees. This also resulted in the continuation of a disturbing trend in modern warfare. At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, less than 10% of combat casualties were civilians. Now, on average, civilians make up 90% of the victims of war.<sup>58</sup>
- Milosevic was allowed to think that he could win. Lack of an effective deterrent and escalation options increased the courage and resolve of the Serbians and allowed Milosevic to think he could win. Once the war began, the only means that NATO could possibly escalate was air strikes that proved ineffective against the Serbian army in Kosovo. While a ground war may have caused more "collateral damage" initially, when combined with airpower, it would have been a more credible deterrent. Then, had that deterrent failed, what the Department of Defense calls "Full Spectrum Dominance" could have been applied to achieve NATO's objectives.<sup>59</sup> But the US, worried about casualties and American public support, only used airpower. Milosevic was right

when he told a reporter on 29 April 1999 that NATO miscalculated. "You are not willing to sacrifice lives to achieve our surrender. But we are willing to die to defend our rights as a sovereign nation."<sup>60</sup>

- The lack of decisive and overwhelming force prolonged the war. The incremental escalation of the bombing gave the Serbs de facto strategic sanctuaries and the slow pattern of the escalation taught them to accept the damage done by airpower.<sup>61</sup> This made it easier for Milosevic to calculate his risk and encouraged him to attempt to ride it out, and by this NATO prolonged the war.<sup>62</sup> Gradual escalation tends to fail, or to make escalation the norm, where shock and decisive force can sometimes produce far more prompt results.<sup>63</sup> There are no rules to history, but if force is worth using at all, the early use of decisive force is generally best.<sup>64</sup>
- Any casualty may have been viewed as a mission failure. Wars like Kosovo may be training political leaders, military planners, the media, and the public to treat every casualty as a mistake and any significant number of casualties as failure.<sup>65</sup> This can ultimately become a critical political and operational constraint on effective action, as well as lead policymakers to underestimate the risk of using force. The risks are obvious: Over-commitment because risks are minimized, rules of engagement that reduce losses but reduce military effectiveness even more, and political and strategic vulnerability to even minimal losses.<sup>66</sup>
- The unrealistic expectations of the air campaign as briefed to the media and politicians by NATO created a backlash when collateral damage was sustained. Few outside the military paid proper attention to warnings by senior military officers before and during the air campaign that collateral damage was inevitable.<sup>67</sup> Instead, NATO briefings stressed a "perfect" or "bloodless" war with 99.4% "accuracy" results from its precision guided munitions. These totally unrealistic expectations lulled the media, politicians, and the public into a false sense of being so that when collateral damage did occur their impact was blown way out of proportion. While these incidents

were used extensively for propaganda purposes by the Serbians they also cut away at the public and policymaker's support. Towards the end of the campaign, public opinion tended to shift against the war, in no small part, because of highly publicized incidents of collateral damage. Lt. General Michael Short, NATO's joint force air component commander in the Balkans, stated that, "Towards the end of the air effort, we were restricted by the enormous concern for collateral damage and unintended loss of life. During the last days of the campaign, that was the litmus we used to pick a target."<sup>68</sup>

The ultimate example of the absurdity of NATO's casualty aversion was when the attack on the two radio and television towers in Belgrade, originally scheduled for April 12<sup>th</sup>, had to be rescheduled because foreign journalists twice ignored warnings to leave the buildings. It was then further delayed by French concerns over targeting journalists.<sup>69</sup> It was eventually destroyed on April 23<sup>rd</sup> but not until after Milosevic had 11 additional days to use this media outlet to help secure the will and loyalty of the Serbian populace. Welcome to the "future" of coalition war fighting.

### **Implication of Casualty Aversion on Joint Doctrine**

Joint Publication 3-0, Doctrine for Joint Operations, applies the term 'joint campaign' to every campaign, whether fought on land, at sea, or in the air.<sup>70</sup> This vocabulary is predicated on common operational practice – capitalizing on firm footing in each dimension of warfare, striking an enemy asymmetrically, and exploiting synergism between maneuver and interdiction.<sup>71</sup> Neither of these seminal doctrinal publications mentions separate ground, maritime, or air campaigns.<sup>72</sup>

And yet, joint doctrine was all but discarded during Operation Allied Force by NATO's selection of a single force element (airpower) campaign. The reasons why airpower became the force of choice are simple. Policymakers have increasingly come to conclude that airpower is an orderly, discrete, and bloodless military option, at least in terms of "bloodless" for Americans. The air campaign presents a deceptively cheap way out in a world in which few casualty averse civilian policymakers are willing to risk casualties-or at least unwilling or unable to explain why humanitarian



operations are worth the life of a servicemember. So airpower alone has become the policy tool of choice for active combat operations since 1992-and has several times become further distorted to mean only salvos of cruise missiles.<sup>73</sup> The bottom-line is that airpower has become the means of choice to achieve this administration's ultimate strategy of casualty aversion: win without anyone being killed.

Since the enactment of the Goldwater-Nichols act, the military has worked hard to ensure that all the services walk-the-walk and talk-the-talk of jointness. But now that a single force element campaign has been waged with the ensuing perception on the part of senior civilian and military leaders that airpower alone "won" the war in Kosovo, the whole doctrine of joint campaigns and the definition of what "jointness" really means have come under fire and are in jeopardy.

Since the end of the Kosovo campaign, airpower advocates have been lauding the premise that airpower alone can win a victory without the need for a ground campaign. It has also led others to speculate that airpower is now so decisive that it should be given the largest share of military budgets and force postures relative to ground and naval forces.<sup>74</sup> These speculators, however, did not include the USAF Chief of Staff or senior officers in the Air Staff, who, to their credit, have stressed the need for joint operations.<sup>75</sup>

In a prophetic 1997 article,<sup>76</sup> Mackubin Owens, a Naval War College professor, states that airpower disciples advocate a form of "strategic monism" which argues that airpower is not only a necessary but actually a sufficient cause of success in war. The argument continues that since an air campaign can achieve decisive victory independent of other arms, the Air Force tends to equate jointness with centralized control of airpower, logically leading to the subordination of the other Services' capabilities to the employment of airpower. This argument [that airpower should be the dominant force] has been made by the Air Force during every major US war beginning even before World War II when the Army Air Corps sold President Roosevelt on their strategic bombing theory. When airpower/strategic bombing became the centerpiece of US strategy in the 1950s to the exclusion of other capabilities, we soon discovered, as a result of the Korean War, that this strategy was both

inflexible and incapable of responding to low-level threats. The reason that this strategy was abandoned in the 1950s is still valid today.

The outcome of the air campaign in Kosovo is, however, an important argument to fund strong, combat ready air forces and to continue to fund major advances in the technology of air combat and the deployment of air combat systems.<sup>77</sup> It is not, however, a reason for arguing for major trade-offs in the funding given to airpower relative to other combat elements, or for redefining “jointness.”<sup>78</sup> It is simply a reality that trade-offs that weaken land and seapower put a steadily heavier burden on airpower, and create added pressures to use it in missions where airpower alone may not be able to do the job.<sup>79</sup>

It is an issue that advocates of airpower are very unlikely to win. Rightly or wrongly, the share each service gets of the defense budget has so much bureaucratic momentum that it is extremely difficult to change.<sup>80</sup> But that is not to say that the airpower advocates won't execute a full court press to try to convince legislators during the upcoming Quadrennial Defense Review. Fortunately, Secretary of Defense Cohen appears to have put this issue to rest during a 10 June 1999 press conference. When asked if the Army would suffer and the Air Force would benefit from Kosovo lessons learned, he stated that “the Army will not suffer as a result of this. This is not a zero-sum gain. This is not a situation where the Air Force with its superb performance will result in diminishing the Army's resources. We have one military and it's fully integrated and it is joint, and where the ground force is required the ground force will. Where the Air Force is required, it will go as well. Presumably, we'll operate *for the most part* fully integrated and joint. This was a unique situation.”<sup>81</sup> I, for one, do not feel confident in Cohen's assertion that Kosovo was a unique situation. The precedent has been set and politicians always look to the last “successful” war to determine how they want the next one to be fought. Kosovo may not, in fact, be a unique situation as it reinforced the notion that all future wars will be coalition wars.

## Recommendations

Recent studies confirmed that civilian policymakers are sorely out of touch with how the public really feels about casualty aversion and what conditions are required to gain the public's support for military interventions. Civilian policymakers should systematically seek out information about the public's true opinions. They should also use polling data not as a determinant or "weather-vane" to forecast the direction of what the US's foreign policy should be, as the current administration is wanted to do, but it should be used as a validation for established and well-formulated policies.

Senior civilian and military leaders must first recognize and then accept the casualty aversion myth as a real influence.<sup>82</sup> But precisely because it is a myth, senior military leaders must be articulate and persuasive in their advice to civilian leaders that the public is, in fact, not so casualty averse.<sup>83</sup> Only then can they fulfill their profession's responsibility for candid and forthright advice to political leaders as well as their responsibility for the preservation of the profession's ethic.<sup>84</sup>

Senior military leaders should also replace all service and joint guidance and doctrine that treats the prevention of US casualties as anything other than an inherent component of any operational mission.<sup>85</sup> The trust in operational commanders' ability to accomplish missions prudently and competently, irrespective of the number of American casualties, must be restored, and immediately so.<sup>86</sup>

The conduct of military briefings during Kosovo gave the public and policymakers the false perception that wars can be "perfect" or "bloodless." It is, however, the media's live coverage of dead Iraqi bodies on the Kuwaiti "highway of death" and a dead Rangers body being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu that shatters the illusory vision of war that DoD is trying to sell. This coverage brings the "Nintendo generation" face to face with the harsh and brutal realities of war. To reduce the public's and, especially, the policymaker's expectations that armed conflict can be anything but "perfect" or "bloodless," DoD needs to educate the public, the media and the policymakers in the true risks of war, and develop public information campaigns that stress the real-world risk of casualties and

collateral damage throughout any conflict. This will help ensure that when the next war occurs, they will be prepared to deal with the fact that even when bombing is “surgical” people will still die horribly on the operating table.<sup>87</sup>

And finally, the majority of the public continues to support a wide range of measures to minimize American casualties in wars and military operations. These are recommendations that both the civilian and military policymakers should take to heart. They include:<sup>88</sup>

1. Increase diplomatic efforts to foster a more benign environment for U.S. forces. This means exhausting all other forms of national power (economic and informational) before resorting to the military option.
2. Increase cost- and risk-sharing with allies. This will be difficult as the majority of NATO countries cut their military budgets right after the Kosovo crisis.
3. Transfer peacekeeping missions to regional powers. This was successfully done during the recent East Timor crisis when Australia took the lead with the US providing strategic lift and logistics support.
4. Place emphasis on force structure and technologies that can minimize US casualties. Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman, Senator Warner, recently challenged the USAF and USA to develop unmanned aircraft and tanks and has put developmental money “on the table.” This is truly a step in the right direction.

### **Conclusion**

War is the province of danger and death; and a casualty-phobic leadership does a disservice to a great power that dozens of other states and hundreds of millions of people around the world look to for leadership and security.<sup>89</sup> Multiple studies have confirmed that the myth of casualty aversion is firmly entrenched within the civilian and military leadership. There is no doubt that the myth has been exacerbated by both President Clinton’s awkward relationship with the military and the apparent unwillingness, or inability, of his administration to create the required bipartisan consensus that is

paramount to shape public opinion and gain its support for future interventions.<sup>90</sup> Unfortunately, the problem of casualty aversion will become a major challenge for the next administration.

The lessons of Kosovo provided the international community two contradictory and somewhat startling revelations. First, it demonstrated the US's battlefield dominance through its use of technologically superior weapons, which many countries fear will now make the US "trigger happy" when dealing with future global problems.<sup>91</sup> And secondly, it advertised to the world America's most vulnerable strategic center of gravity: not its will to fight but its lack of will to use force conclusively and to accept casualties. Our future adversaries closely watched our actions in Kosovo. After NATO's air campaign failed to achieve its overall political objectives and left Milosevic still in power, there is now a heightened degree of danger that future adversaries may have drawn the wrong lessons and believe that they too can be victorious in a future war with the US.

There is no evidence that the American public, because of Kosovo, has the assumption that all future US military operations will be bloodless. Indeed, it is more accurate to say that the public hopes for low-to-no casualty operations but fears a very different outcome.<sup>92</sup> Hopefully, the next administration will be able to learn from the previous one's mistakes and learn how to gain the public's trust and support.

Unless the civilian and military leadership resolve themselves to excise the myth of casualty aversion and its detrimental influences on and pervasive control over the conduct of US foreign policy and military operations, then casualty aversion may very well become the 21st Century's new principle of war.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>3</sup> Joint Military Operations Study Guide, Naval War College, 1999, 32.
- <sup>4</sup> Bernard Brodie, "The Worth Principles of War," Lecture delivered to the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 7 March 1957.
- <sup>5</sup> Eric V. Larson, Casualties and Consensus, (Santa Monica: RAND, 1996), xv.
- <sup>6</sup> Don Snider and others, "Army Professionalism, The Military Ethic, and Officership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," West Point, New York, 8 January 2000. <<http://www.usafa.af.mil/jscope/JSOPE00/Snider/Snider00.html/>>, (31 March 2000).
- <sup>7</sup> Larson, xv.
- <sup>8</sup> Snider and others.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> PIPA is a subsidiary of the Center for International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland.
- <sup>12</sup> Steven Kull and I. M. Destler, "U.S. Foreign Policy: What Do American's Want?" The Chronicle of Higher Education, 3 September 1999.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> TISS is a faculty consortium based at Duke University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and North Carolina State University.
- <sup>17</sup> Peter D. Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, "A Look At...Casualty Aversion: How Many Deaths Are Acceptable? A Surprising Answer," The Washington Post, 7 November 1999, B03.
- <sup>18</sup> Larson, 50.
- <sup>19</sup> Larson, 11.
- <sup>20</sup> Feaver and Gelpi.
- <sup>21</sup> Larson, 96.
- <sup>22</sup> Center for Defense Information, "Show Transcript for "Casualty Phobia".
- <sup>23</sup> Steven Kull, "Misreading the Public Mood." The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, March/April 1995, Vol. 51, No. 2, 56.
- <sup>24</sup> Center for Defense Information, "Show Transcript for "Casualty Phobia".
- <sup>25</sup> Feaver and Gelpi.
- <sup>26</sup> Snider and others.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Center for Defense Information, "Show Transcript for "Casualty Phobia".
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Larson, xvi-xvii.
- <sup>32</sup> Larson, 49.
- <sup>33</sup> Larson, 50.
- <sup>34</sup> Larson, xvi.
- <sup>35</sup> Larson, xvii.
- <sup>36</sup> Feaver and Gelpi.
- <sup>37</sup> Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, "Digest of Findings and Studies, Cantigny Version, TISS Project on the Gap Between the Military and Civilian Society," 28 October 1999. <[http://www.poli.duke.edu/civmil/summary\\_digest.pdf](http://www.poli.duke.edu/civmil/summary_digest.pdf)>. (7 May 2000).
- <sup>38</sup> Feaver and Gelpi.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>41</sup> Feaver and Kohn.
- <sup>42</sup> Snider and others.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>44</sup> Center for Defense Information, "Show Transcript for "Casualty Phobia".
- <sup>45</sup> Public Broadcast System Transcript for Frontline: "War in Europe," Part 1, air date: February 22, 2000. <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kosovo/etc/script1.html/>>. (April 1, 2000).

- <sup>46</sup> Steven Kull and I. M. Destler, "U.S. Foreign Policy: What Do American's Want?" The Chronicle of Higher Education, 3 September 1999.
- <sup>47</sup> James Kitfield, "A War of Limits." National Journal, 24 July 1999.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>49</sup> Secretary of Defense Cohen during a 10 June 1999 press conference. Anthony H. Cordesman, The Lessons and Non-Lessons of the Air and Missile Campaign in Kosovo. (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, Revised September 29, 1999), <<http://www.csis.org/kosovo/lessonstext.pdf>>, (3 March 2000), 36.
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- <sup>51</sup> John D. Morrocco, "Kosovo Reveals NATO Interoperability Woes." Aviation Week & Space Technology, 9 August 1999, 32.
- <sup>52</sup> William T. DeCamp III, "The Big Picture: A Moral Analysis of Allied Force in Kosovo," Marine Corps Gazette, February 2000, 42-44.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>56</sup> Cordesman, 50.
- <sup>57</sup> Center for Defense Information, "Show Transcript for "Casualty Phobia".
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>59</sup> DeCamp III.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>61</sup> Cordesman, 52.
- <sup>62</sup> Gen. Klaus Naumann, Former Chairman, NATO Military Committee. As quoted in the PBS Frontline transcript, "War in Europe," Part 1, <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kosovo/etc/script1.html>>, (April 1, 2000).
- <sup>63</sup> Cordesman, 52.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>65</sup> Cordesman, 59.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>67</sup> Cordesman, 77-78.
- <sup>68</sup> Cordesman, 60.
- <sup>69</sup> Cordesman, 36.
- <sup>70</sup> Peter F. Herrly, "The Plight of Joint Doctrine after Kosovo," Joint Forces Quarterly, Summer 99, 99.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>73</sup> Herrly, 103.
- <sup>74</sup> Cordesman, 44.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>76</sup> Mackubin T. Owens, "The Use and Abuse of 'Jointness'," Marine Corps Gazette, November 1997, 52-53.
- <sup>77</sup> Cordesman, 48.
- <sup>78</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>79</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>80</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>82</sup> Snider and others.
- <sup>83</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>84</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>85</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>87</sup> Cordesman, 77-78.
- <sup>88</sup> Larson, 101.
- <sup>89</sup> Jeffrey Record, "Gutless Giant?" United States Naval Institute, Proceedings, March 2000, 2.
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